

Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxii + 358 pp.

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‘Leave the ignorance caused by sleep behind and  
familiarise yourself with politics and dharma.  
Consider the condition of the fallen country as your domestic work’.

These few lines of poetry by Matadin Shukla, published in one of the women’s journals that are the focus of Nijhawan’s detailed study, in many ways encapsulate the contradictions and tensions explored here. This ‘Plea to Women’, in a 1917 issue of *Stri Darpan*, was authored by a man, but appeared in a journal written largely by and for women. In a self-advertisement, also cited by Nijhawan (p. 38), *Stri Darpan* described itself as ‘[T]he first suitable Hindi monthly paper for women and girls’, containing ‘articles on dharma, literature, society, reforms, and other topics’. This development is one Nijhawan identifies as crucial in the public sphere of the early twentieth century. Even if discussions around the role of women in the home and the world were ‘undergirded by patriarchal assumptions on gender roles and responsibilities’ (p. 69), they were now for the first time being produced and curated by women and for women’s consumption.

This book builds upon the work undertaken by Vasudha Dalmia and Francesca Orsini in particular, in acknowledging the central role that periodical literature played in the creation of tastes, and of new practices of – particularly solitary – reading in this period. Crucially, Nijhawan draws insights from Margaret Beetham’s work on Victorian British women’s journals and views them as a distinct genre: resilient, intervallic, heterogeneous and participatory. With this, she insists that we should not view women’s periodical literature as ‘doubly discredited’, but should rather recognise the ‘nature of resistance’ contained therein (pp. 32-5). Thus her wide reading of the archives of five significant Hindi women’s journals from the 1910s to the 1940s, namely *Stri Darpan*, *Grihalakshmi*, *Arya Mahila*, *Madhuri*, and *Chand*, draws our attention to

intersecting debates on domesticity, nationalism, progress and other issues in a journal-by-journal manner.

Her work on girls' periodicals is truly original and insightful, building on Nandini Chandra's work on children's periodicals to focus on the ideologies directed at young women and girls in the nationalist period in these publications. The archive has given up several gems to Nijhawan's diligent searching. Perhaps most striking is an editorial in which the girl reader is told that 'she should be able to decide for herself whether she wants to marry the bridegroom her father has chosen for her or whether she prefers to devote her life to social service' (p. 107). Yet this assertion, even contextualised as it is by Nijhawan, leaves us wanting to know more: How widespread or frequent were such sentiments, so obviously at odds with prevalent exhortations either to be a supportive wife, or to assume at best a double role, keeping a house while also engaging in the political realm?

The structure of the early chapters in Nijhawan's book, divided according to the periodical under review, does tend to limit the teasing out of common threads, or at least a reading of those that is easier to follow. This said, Nijhawan's analysis of key questions relating to genre, domesticity, nationalism, language politics and the role and position of women comes into its own in the later chapters. Perhaps most importantly, she reveals a realm of discourse around the role of women, social reform and the nationalist movement in which women's subjectivity and agency were acknowledged and developed by women themselves, even if there was no clear agreement on what the precise role of women should be in the imagined new country. On language, too, Nijhawan argues (pp. 222-4) that women's periodicals came to contain a variety of registers of Hindi, in a way that much of the rest of the Hindi literary realm was unable or unwilling to do. This is an important insight, though the chapter in which this point is found occasionally makes some difficult reading for the non-specialist.

In her conclusion, Nijhawan acknowledges the many exclusions and omissions effected by what was an upper/middle class elite realm of Hindu women's production, relating to the obscene, the low class/caste and the Muslim, but suggests that the periodicals 'did not emphasise the readers' Hindu identity', and that 'gender trumped communalist discourses, but notions of sisterhood were by default Hindu' (p. 234). One wonders, especially given the frequent references to *dharma* in the quotations themselves, just how unemphasised Hinduness really

was. Likewise, more reflection on the exclusions themselves would have been welcome. But such minor quibbles aside, one of the great joys of this book is the ability to check the quotations themselves, as Nijhawan gives generous transliterated Hindi originals in the chapter endnotes, for those inclined to check translated terms. Further, most originally and helpfully, the book includes roughly 90 pages of carefully selected and translated extracts from the original journals, with further expositions by Nijhawan. This, in particular, is a useful and welcome resource for teaching and research.

In some ways, this book raises an almost frustrating number of questions, but it answers more. Anyone interested in the history of women's writing in India, of gender and the nationalist period, education, publishing and Hindi literature and language, should find it both useful and insightful.

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